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# Effects of Gender and Individualism-Collectivism on Directness of Refusal



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## Abstract

*The effects of gender and individualism-collectivism on directness of refusal were examined on a Singapore sample. A 2 X 2 (Gender X Individualism-Collectivism) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect between gender and cultural orientation. Specifically, male individualists preferred more direct refusal strategies and male collectivists preferred more indirect refusal strategies compared to both female individualists and collectivists. Implications of the results and the limitations of the study were discussed.*

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## Introduction

Situations of refusal are difficult situations that may necessitate the use of remedial strategies such as apology, excuse or justification to ensure social harmony and smooth interaction (Bresnahan, Cai, & Rivers, 1994; Goffman, 1971). Individuals generally employ consistent styles when responding to refusal situations, and these strategies of refusal can be ordered on a directness-indirectness continuum (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991).

The nature of the relationship between the individual and the group in the society has been broadly referred to as Individualism-Collectivism (Triandis, 1984). Individualists define the self independently of groups and place personal goals above the goals of collectives, while collectivists value interdependence and view the self as a part of the larger group. Research has consistently illustrated that individuals within cultures vary on individualism-collectivism (Schwartz, 1994; Wagner, 1995).

One component of individualism-collectivism that has clear implications for communication is the nature of self-construals. Collectivists are likely to have an interdependent self and are more sensitive and attuned to the needs and feelings of one's in-group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), resulting in the relatively greater use of indirect expressions in interactions (Holtgraves, 1997) as well as the use of indirect strategies for handling conflict and refusal situations (Leung & Lind, 1986; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). In contrast, individualists who possess an independent self are more likely to "say what's on one's mind if one expects to be attended to or understood" (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 229). The individualist would prefer the use of more direct or confrontational strategies when dealing with conflict and refusal situations (Holtgraves & Yang, 1992; Leung & Lind, 1986).

Gire and Carment (1993) found that males compared to females were more extreme in selecting their method of conflict resolution: while males preferred the use of threats in resolving conflict, they were also more likely than females to accept the situation in attempting to resolve conflict. While some scholars have argued for the existence of gender differences in responses to conflict and refusal situations, specifically with women using

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more indirect strategies compared with men (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Cross & Madson, 1997), such gender differences have not consistently been found (e.g., Holtgraves, 1997; Kashima, Yamaguchi, Kim, Choi, Gelfand & Yuki, 1995). These gender differences do not appear to be applicable in non-American and non-European societies. At present, research appears to provide inconclusive evidence on this issue. Perhaps the preferred use of direct or indirect strategies of refusal may be a function of both gender and individualism-collectivism, rather than merely a function of either gender or individualism-collectivism alone. This issue has yet to be empirically studied in the Singapore context. As Gaines et al. (1997) argued convincingly that variability on the individualism-collectivism dimension exists across American and European societies, the same argument could be extended to societies in the South Pacific and Asia. There is also much variability on the individualism-collectivism dimension in Asian and Pacific communities, and it would be interesting to empirically investigate this with a Singapore sample.

The goal of the present research was to use a Singapore sample and extend the cross-cultural investigation of refusal by exploring the effects of gender and individualism-collectivism on the use of various strategies of refusal. We expected an interaction effect between gender and cultural orientation, specifically, that male collectivists would prefer to use less direct strategies than male individualists in refusal situations. Female collectivists and female individualists were not expected to differ significantly from each other with respect to preference for directness of refusal.

## Method and Results

Bresnahan, Cai and Rivers (1994) developed the Refusal Scale consisting of 11 refusal tactics rank-ordered from the most direct (anchored as 1) to the least direct (anchored as 11). An example of a refusal tactic listed on the Refusal Scale would be "The use of an excuse: For example, offering a neutral explanation about the inability to comply to a particular request." The Refusal Scale has been shown to have adequate reliability and validity estimates (Bresnahan, Liu, Chang, Liao, & Futrell, 1994). The individualism-collectivism orientation was measured with the Collectivism Scale, which has been validated for use in Singapore (Singh & Vasoo, 1994). It consists of 24-items and responses were measured on a 9-point Likert-type scale.

The participants were 280 students (140 men, 140 women) from the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University. The mean age was 22.98 years ( $SD = 2.05$ ) for men and 20.27 years ( $SD = 1.55$ ) for women. All the students completed the Refusal Scale and the Collectivism Scale. A median split was used to obtain the groups (individualists and collectivists) for the analyses. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous.

A 2 X 2 (Gender X Individualism-Collectivism) ANOVA yielded a statistically significant interaction effect,  $F = 10.34$ ,  $df = 1, 102$ ,  $p = .002$ . There were no main effects for gender,  $F = 0.55$ ,  $df = 1, 102$ ,  $p = .557$ , or for individualism-collectivism,  $F = 2.40$ ,  $df = 1, 102$ ,  $p = .124$ . In order to interpret the statistically significant interaction between gender and individualism-collectivism, Table 1 gives the mean scores on refusal strategy.

Table 1  
Mean Directness of Refusal Scores

Individualism- Collectivism	Gender	
	Male	Female
Individualists	5.58 (1.89)	6.77 (1.10)
Collectivists	6.96 (1.25)	6.24 (1.81)

*Note.* Values enclosed in parentheses represent standard deviations.

In Table 1, the means indicate directness of refusal: The larger the mean, the more indirect the strategy of refusal. To understand the significant interaction effect further, tests of simple effects were performed using the Tukey test. Given a calculated critical difference value of 1.23, the only significant difference that emerged was between male individualists and male collectivists,  $F = 1.38$ ,  $df = 1, 102$ ,  $p = .044$ . In line with our hypothesis, male individualists chose more direct refusal strategies ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), whilst male collectivists chose more indirect refusal strategies ( $M = 6.96$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), than their female counterparts. The kinds of refusal strategy chosen by females were more similar regardless of orientation along the individualism-collectivism dimension: From Table 1, the means for female individualists and female collectivists were 6.77 ( $SD = 1.10$ ) and 6.24 ( $SD = 1.81$ ), respectively.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Preliminary results from the present study appear to argue for both gender and individualism-collectivism differences in influencing directness of refusal. Currently, research in the areas of refusal and conflict resolution, conducted primarily in America or Europe, have almost exclusively focused on either gender or individualism-collectivism as factors influencing the selection and use of refusal strategies. Results from the present study appear to suggest that individualism-collectivism serves as a moderating variable between the effect of gender and directness of refusal for people groups in Asia or in Asia-Pacific regions. The male refusal response was more influenced by a cultural orientation such as individualism-collectivism than was the female refusal response. For diverse and indigenous people groups in South Pacific and Asia, findings from general American and European psychology may not always be universally applicable. Take for example, the people of Solomon Islands. There are five or more ethnic groups represented and in addition to Melanesian and English, there are about 120 indigenous and tribal languages used (Central Intelligence Agency, 2001).

While the present study contributes to the progress of the study of individualism-collectivism and refusal in the Asia and Pacific regions, certain limitations need to be acknowledged. First, age was a confounding variable in this study. Unfortunately, the difference in ages between the males and females was statistically significant,  $t(279) = 5.42, p < .05$ . Thus, either age or gender could account for the pattern of results obtained. Second, the study was conducted using self-report scales that have limited generalisability to real-world contexts. Undergraduates as sampled in this study are not fully representative of the population and the preliminary findings generated need to be replicated in other populations. Third, it may be possible that sex role orientation (e.g., masculinity, femininity) rather than gender (e.g., male, female) influenced choice of directness of refusal strategy. Thus it would be helpful for future researchers when replicating this study to include both variables of gender and sex roles in the study of refusal.

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